

tolerance

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Three Concepts of Tolerance – an Evangelical Contribution

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"Can you tell stories in a cabinet meeting? Advocate a cause in the barracks?" Jean-Francois Lyotard, French Philosopher.¹

What kind of conversation is permissible in the public square? The significance of the quotation from the late Jean-Francois Lyotard is that this question rears its head in all kinds of settings. The rugby club and the church Elder's meeting may be very different locations, but both are governed by a set of unwritten rules that dictate the kind of speech that is allowed. I have spent significant amounts of time in both, and whilst it may be thought that the rugby club is the more permissive of the two, consider which of the following would receive the greater opprobrium: saying 'f*** that' in the Elder's meeting, or singing a song about Jesus in the club. I never tried either (I respected the rules), but I suspect it would be the latter.

We live our lives, then, by means of tightly defined social conventions in which the rules of discourse are rarely discussed (or broken), but rather are assimilated unconsciously by those attending. As C.S.Lewis pointed out in *The Inner Ring*, it is precisely by the acceptance of these unwritten rules that we often find ourselves admitted into the group in the first place. In such settings, the issue of tolerance appears fairly straightforward. As long as people operate in public according to the group consensus, then whatever they get up to in their private lives is tolerated. Problems only arise when someone enters the group intent on playing according to a different set of criteria – "tell stories in a cabinet meeting, advocate a cause in the barracks".

Arguably, the situation in which this is most frequently experienced is the family home, especially the kind of home populated by teenagers who have not quite learned that the rules of discourse with their friends do not necessarily obtain with their parents. In such a setting, a different kind of tolerance operates. This is not so much a tolerance of the private sphere – as within the home the public-private split has less meaning – but it is a pragmatic tolerance, in which despite vehement disagreement the parents and teenagers arrive at some kind of truce on a daily basis.

¹ Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) chapter 5.

These two forms of political organisation at the local level are, we can suggest, replicated at the macro level of society. They are known by many names, but let us call them 'the liberal consensus' and 'agonistic politics'.²

According to the former of these, the public square must be a tightly controlled environment in which only certain forms of discourse are allowed. All other differences can be tolerated as long as they remain firmly in the private sphere. According to the second, the public square should be a multiplicity of competing voices each speaking from within their own frame of reference, and the tolerance to be adopted is merely that which is pragmatically necessary to function. In milder forms, this latter kind of political arrangement is known as multiculturalism, and for a while it was celebrated in Britain as the way to organise society. However, its death knell was sounded by Tony Blair in a speech he made addressing the issue when he said, "Obedience to the rule of law, to democratic decision-making about who governs us, to freedom from violence and discrimination are not optional for British citizens. They are what being British is about. Being British carries rights. It also carries duties. And *those duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice*".³ (Emphasis added) For many Christians, this statement is deeply problematic as it is our faith that leads us to obey the rule of law, to respect democracy and freedom. Our duties to one another and to the state arise in response to our faith, but can never take precedence over it. What has become clear, though, since Blair's speech is that as a society we have little idea how best to acknowledge (or celebrate) diversity, whilst maintaining some form of national identity. Recent debates over the extent to which local councils provide translation services is merely a case in point. As one commentator put it, "We are at sea without social norms, and yet who's to decide them? We're all confused, but we need to talk about it. It's not enough for us just to retreat from this issue, afraid of interfering with other people's lives."⁴

It is worth pointing out, here, that multiculturalism is not the same as religious pluralism as the two concepts frequently become conflated. The latter idea is merely the empirical fact that a range of religious faiths exist in a given society. This needs to be distinguished from cultural pluralism, and in particular multiculturalism, which strictly speaking is a system or ideology that is created to manage the wide range of cultures that exist in society. Importantly, these cultures cannot be reduced to expressions of religious faith, and religious faiths are not merely products of culture.

² From the Greek, *agon*, meaning conflict.

³ 'The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values', 8 December 2006.
<http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10563.asp>

⁴ Jenni Russell, 'Basic civility is about social solidarity, not priggishness', *The Guardian*, May 3rd 2007.

We have already alluded to the fact that our concepts of tolerance go hand-in-hand with our concepts of political organisation, and I would suggest that part of our reason for conceptual murkiness in relation to diversity politics is that we do not have a sufficiently robust idea of tolerance to work with.

One example will suffice. Tolerance is defined as the acceptance (in some sense) of that of which I would otherwise disapprove. But why it is good for me to accept what I consider bad? This is the well described 'paradox of toleration', and the reality of it means that our notions of tolerance cannot bear the conceptual (or real) weight that are placed upon them as we struggle with the reality of multicultural Britain.

Against this background it may therefore be understandable, if regrettable, that notions of tolerance and equality have often been accompanied by responses of cynicism and mistrust. 'Political correctness' appears to many to assume that not only do I have to exercise a respectful attitude to others with whom I disagree, but that at the same time I have to accept other views as equally true, even though contrary to mine. It is a fact that there have been plenty of reports of cases in which religious believers, for example, have experienced discrimination in the public realm and have felt their religious liberties and freedom of expression to be under threat. 'Tolerance' in today's secular society has become widely perceived by many religious groups to involve acceptance of everything apart from perceived intolerance – which seems to be used to justify hostile attitudes to religious belief together with attempts to remove its expression from the public arena. This suggests that there is a bigger debate yet to be had and a consensus yet to be reached about the actual meaning of tolerance, religious liberty and freedom of speech within a society that claims to place human rights at its heart.

In this article, then, the Evangelical Alliance would like to make a contribution to that discussion by offering an alternative concept of tolerance – beyond the liberal consensus or agonistic approaches – one that is based on the teachings and practice of Jesus Christ, and one that may speak to us in our present situation.

Table-fellowship

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15: 1-2)

One of the more remarkable features of the gospel accounts of Jesus is his table manners. Who you ate with, and how you ate were seriously important issues in first century Palestine. And Jesus managed to upset everyone by how he did it.

One New Testament scholar even goes so far as to say that Jesus got himself killed by how he ate.⁵ Even if that is somewhat of an exaggeration, it highlights the truth that Jesus' approach to eating was somewhat at odds with the societal norms. Joel Green, the respected New Testament scholar, writes:

In the ancient Mediterranean world, mealtime was a social event whose significance far outdistanced the need to satisfy one's hunger. To welcome people at the table had become tantamount to extending to them intimacy, solidarity, acceptance; table companions were treated as though they were of one's extended family. Sharing food encoded messages about hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and crossing boundaries. Who ate with whom, where one sat in relation to whom at the table – such questions as these were charged with social meaning in the time of Jesus and Luke. As a consequence, to refuse table fellowship with people was to ostracize them, to treat them as outsiders. It is against this backdrop that Jesus' table practices...are set in sharp relief.⁶

For Jesus' table manners were significantly different from those of his contemporaries. Whilst their emphasis was on maintaining purity in terms of how you ate (washing ceremonies before eating, limitations on food preparation on the Sabbath), what you ate (kosher food), and who you ate with (only the ritually clean), Jesus challenges all of these boundaries. In feeding large groups at once (Matthew 14:13ff and parallels), he seems to pay no attention to the inevitable mix of Jews, Gentiles and outcasts that would have been present, or what the seating arrangement would be, let alone how they were all supposed to wash ceremonially before the meal.⁷ Even more astonishing is the story in Luke 7 where during a meal at Simon the Pharisee's house, Jesus is joined by an ex-prostitute.⁸ The New Testament account describes her washing Jesus' feet with her tears, then drying his feet with her hair, and kissing and pouring perfume on them. As Green comments, "Within her cultural context...her actions on the whole would have been regarded (at least by men) as erotic. Letting her hair down in this setting would have been on a par with appearing topless in public...It is no wonder that Simon entertains serious reservations about Jesus' status as a holy man."⁹ Yet, Jesus' response is not to rebuke the woman, or to say that her actions were inappropriate in this meal setting. Rather, he praises her as an example of faith.

⁵ Karris, Robert J., *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist, 1985) chapter 4.

⁶ Green, Joel, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) p87.

⁷ Edwards, J.R., *The Gospel According to Mark* (Leicester: IVP, 2002) p193. Poon, W.C.K., 'Superabundant Table Fellowship in the Kingdom: The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Meal Motif in Luke', *Expository Times* 114: 2003, pp226-228.

⁸ Green, Joel, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p309. The Greek term is of a sinner in the town.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p310.

"Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."
(Luke 7:44-47)

In acting this way, it is not that Jesus is somehow unaware of the societal norms. The very fact that a prominent Pharisee has invited Jesus to his home demonstrates that Jesus, at least, was considered an appropriate guest, and therefore one who understood the normal conventions. It is, rather, that Jesus is deliberately and provocatively breaking those conventions. As Green says,

Because the sharing of food is a 'delicate barometer' of social relations, when Jesus subverts conventional mealtime practices...he is doing far more than offering sage counsel for his table companions. Rather, he is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative.¹⁰

Indeed, it is precisely this challenge to the norm that lends historical weight to this facet of Jesus' ministry.¹¹ In an age when some New Testament experts express doubts regarding the historicity of the gospels, Jesus' unconventional table practices are one of the features that even some of the most sceptical scholars accept. So, J.D. Crossan, a leading member of the Jesus Seminar school of thought, accepts that these kind of events (and the narrative above is just one of many) were historically accurate and in the process is reported to have described Jesus as 'the consummate party animal'.¹²

But the question remains. Why does Jesus behave in this manner? What is his purpose, and what relevance does it have for us as we struggle with issues of tolerance in twenty-first century Britain? An answer to these questions begins to appear if we consider the final few verses of the story regarding Simon and the prostitute;

¹⁰ Ibid., p550.

¹¹ This is the case because it passes the double dissimilarity criterion for authentic sayings of Jesus. See Blomberg, Craig L., *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2005) chapter 1.

¹² Ibid., p97ff.

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:47-50)

There is a danger, evident in some circles, of merely interpreting Jesus' actions as a celebration of diversity, as if all he was interested in was wining and dining with as many different kinds of people as possible. If that were true, the description of him as "the consummate party animal" would be entirely apt, and nothing more need be said. However, as Craig Blomberg has argued, Jesus' wider purpose is transformation by means of acceptance. In surveying the passages that describe Jesus' unusual table practices, Blomberg concludes:

The unifying theme that emerges...is one that may be called 'contagious holiness'. Jesus regularly associates with the various sorts of sinners on whom the most pious in his culture frowned, but his association is never an end in itself. Implicitly or explicitly, he is calling people to change their ways and follow him as their master. But unlike so many in his world (and unlike so many cultures throughout the history of the world), he does not assume that he will be defiled by associating with corrupt people. Rather, his purity can rub off on them and change them for the better. Cleanliness, he believes, is even more 'catching' than uncleanness; morality more influential than immorality.¹³

We see this pattern in the story above. At great personal cost, Jesus welcomes and accepts the prostitute, whilst still acknowledging her sin and the transformation that is made possible by her faith in him. Crucially, as Ben Witherington has observed, Jesus does not insist on this transformation to have taken place *in advance* of his acceptance.¹⁴ In enjoying table fellowship with Jesus, the tax collectors and sinners are called to repentance and faith in him, but there is no evidence that a moral perfectionism is required before they can sit and dine. The door is open, the food is waiting, the invitation has been offered – and whilst the invite comes with a call to transformation, it is not dependant on that transformation having been realised before they sit and party. Indeed, how could it be? The message of the gospels is that personal transformation is only possible by means of our fellowship with Jesus. All attempts at transformation outwith a relationship with him are doomed to failure. Hence, what Jesus offers is an open invitation to everyone, irrespective of background and social standing, and yet an invitation that is not just to fellowship, but also to transformation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p102.

That is Jesus' model of table-fellowship. Its relevance to contemporary issues of tolerance is where we now turn.

Tolerating Tolerance

As already indicated, there are, roughly speaking, two concepts of tolerance evident in the contemporary political and cultural climate. These two concepts, in turn, relate to two distinct styles of political organisation. However, as the vignettes from the introduction have indicated, neither of these concepts are adequate for the serious social and political situations in which we find ourselves.

The first of these concepts conceives of tolerance as a substantive good (in contrast to a pragmatic necessity), and its political bedfellow is a consensual approach. This is the standard liberal paradigm for tolerance, in which we tolerate the differences that divide for the sake of a unity around some public consensus such as freedom, or rationality, or human rights.

Under this rubric, political discourse takes place within circumscribed boundaries – the notional public sphere. Tolerance is operative to the extent that we put up with those aspects of the individual that even though we may disapprove of, and disagree with, we will not outlaw as long as they remain within the private realm. The language of tolerance in association with issues of sexuality is the classic example of this paradigm. What people do in their own bedrooms – so the argument goes – is of no relevance to their public performance, and so there must be no restrictions or infringements of their opportunities. Such tolerance operates in the privatised space, and it represents a substantive good to the extent that it fosters a public consensual space in which discourse can proceed along agreed lines. Kristen Johnson describes it thus:

Liberal invocations of tolerance have their roots in a very distinct epistemology, which includes a belief that through the use of reason all people can be unified around a body of common truths and morals, regardless of their other differences. The goal is a unity that can stand despite and independent of differences, so that 'public' life engages only with that which is held in common, while 'divisive' differences are left in the 'private' sphere.¹⁵

¹⁵ Johnson, Kristen, *Theology, Theology, Political Theory and Pluralism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007) p2.

Such a concept of tolerance as a substantive good is predicated on the good of individual freedom. In popular parlance it says, 'I can do whatever I like as long as I don't harm anyone else'. Indeed, this sentiment is the leitmotif of modern liberal democracies. The good of personal autonomy substantiates the good of tolerance. The only threat to such a consensual tolerant model is when some bring that which rightly should remain private into the consensual public sphere. So, Richard Rorty describes 'religion as a conversation stopper' in precisely this way.¹⁶ According to Rorty, religion is just about acceptable in the private realm, but in the public realm all it does is inhibit conversation – as the other partners round the table have no way to respond.

As already indicated, at the local level this approach to society is by far the predominant one. In the Sport's club, the church meeting, the scientific conference different conceptions of acceptable public speech may be operative, but nevertheless in each of those settings some such conception *is* operative. And problems only arise when that convention is breached.

This is not, though, the only concept of tolerance, and certainly not the only form of political discourse, that is evident in contemporary society. The second concept of tolerance to be described is tolerance as a pragmatic necessity, and its dining partner is an agonistic political theory. Kristen Johnson again explains,

For agonistic theorists...difference is to be celebrated because it lies at the very heart of the way the world is and the way our identities are constituted. They bring to the conversation a concern that liberal tolerance is not sufficient because it still, by definition, involves disapproval rather than embrace of difference and, to work, it requires that differences not be recognized in any public way. By assuming that it is possible to keep difference and conflict out of our common political life, political liberalism overlooks the conflictual, agonistic nature of reality. The presence of conflict and power in all aspects of life, relationships, institutions, and structures means that attempts to find unity or to develop political theories in the name of unity always suppress or do violence to difference. Unity cannot, according to these agonistic or post-Nietzschean political theorists, be the goal, nor tolerance the way to get there. Instead, these theorists search for a way to move beyond tolerance and unity to a deeper and richer embrace of difference. For the sake of diversity, they relinquish the hope of unity.¹⁷

¹⁶ Rorty, Richard, 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper' in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1999) pp168-174.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Theology*, p3.

Philosophically, John Milbank has described this understanding in terms of the ontology of violence.¹⁸

More popularly, it is simply called the Big Brother house! Having indicated that these theorists abandon notions of tolerance, this is only the case at the ideal or principled level. As a pragmatic necessity, even such theorists adopt some form of tolerance. The important point is that it is not considered as itself a good, but merely a tool that enables us to survive in such an agonistic environment. Its pragmatism is evident to the extent that it is used instrumentally to protect diversity.

As numerous commentators, especially in the academic community, have pointed out both these concepts of tolerance, and their attendant politics have a range of problems associated with them. The first of these relates to the boundary conditions that must be articulated. In other words, what precisely can and cannot be tolerated? In respect of tolerance as a pragmatic necessity, the problem of adequately defining what should or should not be tolerated was vividly demonstrated by the recent race scandal affecting Big Brother. The program is defined by the oppositional, agonistic stance of its protagonists, but the acceptable boundaries of that oppositional behaviour came under question when Jade Goody made comments that appeared to many to be racist. One cannot help but feel a little sympathy for Jade, for whilst her comments were undoubtedly inappropriate, she had been placed in that program precisely for her aggressive stance. In her mind, she was doing exactly what the program makers wanted – it was just not what the general public thought appropriate. Conflicts like these, then, will always occur if our only way of organising the political sphere is an agonistic approach in which tolerance is merely pragmatic necessity.

The problem of boundary conditions, though, is just as intractable in respect of tolerance as a substantive good and its concomitant consensual politics. A recent example of this was the decision by the parliamentary Select Committee on Science and Technology to exclude ethical issues in its examination of the upper time limit for abortion. In artificially deciding that the science was public, whilst the ethics private, the committee flew in the face of 50 years of progress in the rightful moderation of science. One of the reasons why all universities and medical schools have ethics committees is precisely because they realise that whether scientists like it or not, science has ethical implications.

¹⁸ Milbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). For Milbank, such 'violence' is evident whenever we view society as a sphere of necessary conflict.

Hence, even if we consider tolerance as a substantive good based on notions of individual autonomy, we run into difficulties as soon as we are forced (as we are) to define the specific boundary between the public and private.

The second problem affecting our contemporary conceptions of tolerance is the inevitable passivity that they engender. By definition, tolerance is to refrain from acting or speaking in situations where one might have acted otherwise. Yet, it is precisely this reticence to interfere that has arguably contributed to one of the more pernicious features of our culture: a walk-on-by mentality. Whilst those who challenge antisocial behaviour are rightly praised, the more common trait amongst the UK populace is to turn a blind eye even to the most atrocious behaviour. Not so long ago, whilst walking through the middle of a busy tube station, I saw three large men clearly harassing and abusing a pretty young woman. What I found shocking was not only the scores of people who simply ignored the plight of the young lady, but my own hesitation at getting involved. We prize the have-a-go-heroes precisely because they are not the norm. And yet, what we have failed to recognize is that this attitude is one that stems from our celebration of modern forms of tolerance. The obvious corollary of '*I won't interfere in your life, if you don't interfere in mine*' is '*I won't help you, if you won't help me*'. An ICM poll from 2003 found that whilst 78% of people said they would intervene if they saw someone mistreating or kicking their dog, only 53% of people would intervene if someone was mistreating or kicking their partner. What is the difference here? Presumably the danger of retaliation is the same in both cases. So, perhaps the only difference is that we do not think of animals as having a private life that is none of our concern.

Bretherton, drawing on the work of David Hollenbach, comments,

It seems tolerance acts as a break [*sic*] to any constructive action. Hollenbach notes that 'any form of genuine human action adds to or tries to change the direction of what is happening.' Yet, tolerance, understood as never challenging opinions [we might add 'or behaviours'] others hold, reduces us to silence and inactivity, because to add to and seek to change what others think is by definition intolerance. As Hollenbach notes, it is obviously a *reductio ad absurdum* to imply that a public philosophy built around tolerance aims to get people to stop talking and acting. However, this is the effect it has.¹⁹

It is worth pointing out that this passivity applies to whichever of our two concepts of tolerance we are working with. In regard to tolerance as a substantive

¹⁹ Bretherton, Luke, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) p147.

good, such passivity is evident when we fail to challenge behaviours that are directly harmful to those involved out of some misplaced notion that what they do in their private lives is none of our business. The support of some for cannabis decriminalisation is probably a case in point here: the value of individual autonomy outweighed the cost of personal harm. In relation to a pragmatic conception of tolerance, a similar passivity has been evident in the way in which certain ethnic or religious communities have developed in isolation from the rest of society. Out of a desire to respect diversity, which in some cases has simply meant doing nothing to encourage integration, we have ended up with sections of the populace severely polarised.²⁰ Now, it is clear that this line of argument is frequently overstated – but that does not remove the fact that it has some validity. Tolerance as passivity does not solve social problems; in fact it creates them. As Hollenbach, in relation to the US scene, states, "Acceptance or tolerance of difference will certainly not knit up the tears in the flesh of the American body politic today. When acceptance of difference becomes acquiescence in deep social disparities and human misery it becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution."²¹

Finally, our modern conceptions of tolerance fall short in respect of the individualism upon which they are based. Whilst many liberals like to think they have moved beyond Margaret Thatcher's "There's no such thing as society", they fail to see that they have simply taken an alternative branch up the Enlightenment tree. As Susan Mendus puts it, "We need to understand how people are *interdependent* as well as *independent*. We need to explain how autonomy is formed, not solely from the internal nature of individuals, but also from the nature of the society in which they find themselves."²² Neither of our two modern conceptions of tolerance recognise sufficiently the interdependence that characterises us as social beings. They both work with a flawed conception of human nature. Tolerance as a substantive good fails to appreciate it because it is predicated on a notion of individual autonomy as *the social good*. However, even tolerance as a pragmatic necessity fails to recognise it as it assumes we can operate within a rarefied schema in which a continual antagonism does not fundamentally alter our state of being. It seems to believe that we maintain our identity in opposition to those around us, rather than by relating rightly to those around us. It is, if you like, the billiard ball version of society, rather than the web. We bounce off each other, rather than connect. We are hard, rather than sticky. The failure, then, of both conceptions is simply to fail to spot the wrong turn that

²⁰ Incidentally, the same phenomenon is evident in our unwillingness to challenge certain forms of family life irrespective of whether they harm the child or not. Our passive valuing of adult autonomy seems to outweigh our active safeguarding of children.

²¹ Cited in Bretherton, *Hospitality*, p147.

²² Cited in *Ibid.*, p125.

Descartes and others took when they placed the individual at the centre of reflective thinking. If human beings, and therefore society, are inherently relational and interdependent, then any procedure for social and political interaction that fails to take this into account will have failed before it has begun. It is time for an alternative approach.

Jesus and Politics²³

It is our contention that we see in Jesus' example of table-fellowship a model and example of tolerance. Moreover, this paradigm is one that could be applied in our contemporary situation at both the local and macro scale. In the first place, Jesus' practice is an example of tolerance just to the extent that he welcomes and accepts all into relationship with him. We must not lose sight of the fact that in opening the door to tax-collectors, prostitutes and outcasts, and inviting them to dine with him, Jesus was not just providing food. In fact, the provision of food was the least significant aspect of his actions. Rather, it was the social and religious acceptance that his actions indicated that would have had the main impact.²⁴ In welcoming these people, Jesus was making it clear to the rest of society that these groups were just as much part of God's kingdom as the religious elite. In fact, frequently they were ahead of the religious leaders in entering God's kingdom (Matthew 21:31-32). Moreover, in accepting them irrespective of past behaviour – including past behaviour of which Jesus undoubtedly disapproved – and in advance of moral transformation, Jesus exhibited what can only be described as tolerance. It is not the case that Jesus thought prostitution or the kind of avaricious tax collecting that took place was acceptable. Jesus' point was that even though he disapproved of their behaviour, those people were still welcome at his table, and by extension the kingdom of God.

Yet, at the same time, Jesus' practice of tolerance avoids the pitfalls we mentioned earlier. In the first place, it has clear boundaries. Jesus is not saying, come join the party and nothing more is expected. He is saying, join the party, fellowship with me, and by means of that fellowship expect to be transformed. His only requirement, and yet it is a requirement, was a willingness to be changed. More particularly, Blomberg has developed the notion that the role Jesus was taking in these events was that of host. He was not always the host in the sense of one providing the food, but he was the spiritual host, making it clear who was, and who was not acceptable at the party. The significance of this is that we see the boundary criteria for entering the party was not just an openness to transformation, but also a respect for the host, and especially the authority of the

²³ Much of this section is derived or inspired from Bretherton, *Hospitality*; Blomberg, *Contagious*; Johnson, *Theology*.

²⁴ Poon, 'Superabundant', p5.

host. The people that Jesus rejected were precisely those who refused to recognise his authority by rejecting the invitation he had extended, and who, by extension, were unwilling to change (Luke 14:15-24). His was not, then, an entirely open invitation. It has conditions attached. The boundary however is clear: respect and recognition for the authority of Jesus Christ as religious host.

In the second place, Jesus' model of tolerance avoids the dangers of passivity. Once again, he is not saying, come dine with me, and I will leave you as you are – but rather, come dine with me, and I will change you. As we have noticed, Jesus' goal was not diversity for diversity's sake, but rather the possibility of change by means of relationship with him.

Finally, his table-fellowship is not based on a flawed conception of humanity. The substantive good that Jesus recognises is not the good of individual autonomy, but the good of interdependence, in particular dependence on Christ himself. The good upon which his practice of tolerance is based is the good of knowing Jesus, and by means of that, the good of living in community with other fellow believers. Jesus calls us, then, to a true freedom, in which we are at liberty to accept responsibility, obey God, and serve our neighbour. We have, then, a thick description of tolerance that arises from the practices of a first century preacher – but does it have any relevance for our contemporary political arrangements?

We shall go on to suggest that it does, but in doing this we are not assuming that there is any straightforward path to be trod from the practices of Jesus to 21st century politics. A theological case could be made for such a transition, but that is not what we are attempting here. Rather, in the face of the obvious problems with our contemporary arrangements, we are asking whether reflection on the practices of Jesus Christ might not enable us to imagine a different kind of political arrangement in the present. It is possible that such a work may fail, but it is also possible that it may succeed, and nothing is lost by engaging creatively and constructively in the task. It is in that spirit that we proceed.

Given that in Jesus' model of table-fellowship the most important boundary condition identified was respect for the authority of the host, can we recognise a suitable host in our current situation?

At first sight, we might consider the reigning government as the host, after all they have been democratically elected. However, let me propose that the true host we should recognise is the whole populace, or even possibly the global population.²⁵ In saying this, it is important to emphasize that by 'populace' I do not mean some abstract notion of the 'nation'. Rather, we would draw on Jesus' definition of our

²⁵ Given the reality of climate change, one could even argue that the host to be respected is the *future* global population.

'neighbour' to articulate the parameters of this conception.²⁶ According to Jesus, our 'neighbour' is not defined by someone in geographical, social, religious, cultural or ethnic proximity. Rather, his point in the parable of *The Good Samaritan*,²⁷ where this question is addressed, is that in respect of the love command all those boundaries are illegitimate, and that our neighbour is simply anyone and everyone.²⁸

The populace, then, to whom we must show respect consists of our 'neighbours' in the sense outlined above, whether considered individually or corporately. What this means, though, is that the boundary marker between those we tolerate, and those we do not is defined by this attitude of respect. This does not mean that individuals, or groups, must agree with the majority opinion – for the majority is not the populace, but they must, as a whole, respect the populace. On these grounds, then, the terrorist or violent offender need not be tolerated whereas those who disagree with the majority, even by means of protest, should be. But what kind of tolerance are we talking about? What does it mean to tolerate all who respect the host of the populace?

As host, Jesus accepted lavish banquets from rich tax-collectors, cups of cold water from disgraced single women, and perfume from prostitutes. He did not put limits on the manner in which people demonstrated their respect, nor did he reject them purely because the guardians of the population rejected them. In like manner, might not our public square be characterised by a far greater plurality of voices, each of which speaks in its own terms, in line with its own categories. According to the consensual model of tolerance, we can only allow certain forms of discourse, thus negating at outset the genuine concerns and modes of expression of some. However, by means of the agonistic approach, all we get is a loud shouting match that is insufficiently controlled until it spirals out of control. Given a robust concept of a boundary condition of respect for the host, namely the populace, why could we not have a public square characterised by a multitude of voices all speaking in their own categories, and in their own terms? Why is it

²⁶ See also the recent report by the religious think tank Theos which draws a distinction between 'nation', and 'neighbour' as two alternative paradigms for building the civil society. The Theos report makes a strong case for the latter as the more effective approach. 'Red, White, Blue...and Brown: Citizens, Patriots and the Prime Minister' by Stephen Backhouse, available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk

²⁷ Luke 10:25–37.

²⁸ A point that Richard Dawkins completely fails to see. Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) pp254ff.

that Descartes or Kant or Epicurus can be referenced in the town hall, but not Jesus or Mohammed? Now admittedly, the former are not usually quoted by name, but that is not the point – their philosophies and presuppositions are prevalent in the discourse. As we have indicated, this is not, though, merely a return to an agonistic politics, in which tolerance is no more than a pragmatic construct. Rather, the tolerance we need here is a deliberate, intentional tolerance that welcomes this multitude of voices on the basis of respect for the whole populace. It is tolerance as table-fellowship.

When we apply the example of Jesus' table-fellowship to the requirements of a just political community the thrust is towards a much more open system of representation. The goal, unlike Jesus' dinner parties, is not the religious transformation of those admitted into the representative system, but something much less, though still vital: basic respect for their rights as fully equal citizens to participate fully in the public realm, which may also have the benefit of elevating the level of political debate and the opening up of new solutions to policy questions that the dominant groups cannot see.

Utilising such a conception, the problem of passivity is also avoided. Precisely because there is a single public sphere in which all modes of discourse are allowed, including those that usually take place within the conventional private sphere, the existence of that passively accepted sphere becomes irrelevant. Precisely by being allowed to have a genuine voice at the public table, it is likely that the isolation that we perceive in certain communities would be diminished.

This point has recently been argued by the chief executive of the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) in responding to government proposals to restrict funding for community groups that only represent one sector of the population. He wrote:

The commission's report...took the view that funding minority groups increases segregation and should become the exception. I disagree. During my career I have worked with community groups in Hull, Newcastle and Derby, and I am now in touch with Navca's members throughout England. That experience has convinced me that, far from reinforcing segregation, funding for faith and minority ethnic groups often helps them become effective advocates on behalf of their communities....By helping minority ethnic groups build their self-sufficiency we enable them to take an active part in civil society.²⁹

²⁹ Kevin Curley, 'Response: Minority and Faith Groups Can Help Cohesion', *The Guardian* 17th October 2007.

Clearly, this is not precisely the same as the active stance that Jesus took in relation to his dinner guests, but it is certainly a more active approach than we currently enjoy.

In a similar vein, this approach is not based on a flawed conception of the individual in isolation from society. The paradigm we are working with is one in which all voices are allowed at the table, because all the voices are necessary for the sustenance of a healthy community. It is not me as an individual, or my freedom, that grounds this conception, it is *us* and *our* good. That is the ultimate basis for such tolerance.

But the question remains, whether we have any concrete examples in which this kind of paradigm has been practised. Well, there are none at the macro level for the simple reason that it has never been adequately tested. However, at the local level, it happens all the time in a social setting that strangely enough is very similar to the one in which Jesus was engaged: the dinner party.

The Dinner Party

At the typical dinner party, there exists a very free approach to discourse. Not only might the topic of discussion range from the latest scientific discovery to politics to sport to sex to children to foreign travels, the mode of conversation is similarly varied depending on whom is sitting round the table. At times, someone will state authoritatively what the latest academic research on a topic is. Someone else will chip in with a piece of insider information. Another might conduct a conceptual analysis, and another will reflect with a personal reminiscence or experience that is relevant to the topic.

No one mode of discourse is unduly privileged above the rest. Indeed, the person that dogmatically considers their own view as the only one worthy of merit is usually considered a bore – and may find the invites dry up. Whilst this kind of conversation can end up in a stultifying post-modern relativism, it is often the case that a genuine consensus can emerge that has taken into account the whole range of views as they have been expressed in their own terms. In other words, the academic is allowed to speak *as* academic, and their contribution is evaluated on those terms. The personal experience is shared *as* a personal experience, and is similarly evaluated with its own integrity. Human beings are generally rational enough to know that these different kinds of speech are both of value, and whilst they cannot be directly compared, they can both contribute to a wider vision of reality. The dinner party, then, allows all participants to be heard – and to be heard in their own terms. In addition to this, the dinner party does not invent or baptise the artificial notion of a public private split. In giving space to all

participants to share, it means that whatever each person wants to contribute, they are allowed to contribute. It is not, then, the same as the scientific convention, or indeed the parliamentary Select Committee on Science and Technology where certain forms of discourse are explicitly barred. And the notion of tolerance that is operative is precisely not the notion of tolerance as a substantive good based on individual autonomy. Something else is going on here.

But the dinner party is also not the same as the Big Brother house. Whilst all topics and modes of discourse are allowed – whether private or public – there remain some boundaries governing the event. Respect for one another is the first of these. Even at the dinner party, there is a line that can be crossed and at which point the invitee is asked to leave. If, for instance, someone was unnecessarily rude, or threatening or violent, the rest of the party would support the one at the receiving end of that behaviour and demand that the perpetrator leave. It is important to note that this would happen whether or not the rest of the party agreed or disagreed with the point the perpetrator was making. The requirement to maintain a certain level of civility outstrips the issue at question. Yet, at the same time, this is a minimal commitment. It is not there to stifle conversation, or even vehement disagreement. But it is there to ensure that conversation can continue, rather than be stifled. Whilst this social convention applies in respect of one's fellow guests, it applies particularly in respect of the host. Whilst one might ignore someone else in the party asking you to leave, if the host says your time is up, then it really is.

This is all part of the unwritten contractual arrangement with the host. In accepting their invitation, and receiving their generosity, you are also agreeing to abide by their code of conduct in respect of dinner party manners. Respect for the host, then, becomes the guide to the nature of the dinner party boundaries.

Hence, in the contemporary dinner party, tolerance is evident to the extent that all modes of discourse are allowed, none are rejected at outset. Yet, at the same time, the boundary marker is clear: respect for the other guests, and especially respect for the host, including their authority. Passivity is avoided, at least in the ideal, in that all guests come with an expectation that they might learn something from one another. It is certainly a less passive environment than our macro, public approach to social engagement. The reason space is given for the personal reminiscence is because it may have purchase in relation to others' situations. In addition, the ultimate good at stake is not the good of individual autonomy, but the good of the shared social space that is the dinner party.

There are, of course, some points of divergence between Jesus' practices and our contemporary setting, but my purpose in drawing attention to the dinner party is heuristic. The fact that as twenty-first century people from a wide range of

backgrounds and experiences we manage to negotiate successfully that social space suggests that if we applied a similar approach to our public macro discourse, might we not also discover a richer, fuller concept of tolerance, as well as a richer, fuller model for society. This, at least, is what Jesus' example suggests. It is also what another Rabbi – this time from the twenty-first Century – seems to have had in mind:

The answer...is *conversation* – not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own). Each is a genuine form of respect, of paying attention to the other, of conferring value on his or her opinions even though they are not mine. In a debate one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective. That is not to say that either gives up its previous convictions. That is not what conversation is about. It does mean, however, that I may now realize that I must make space for another deeply held belief, and if my own case has been compelling, the other side may understand that it too must make space for mine. That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society – not by a single dominant voice, nor by the relegation of moral issues to the private domain of home and local congregation, but by a sustained act of understanding and seeking to be understood across the boundaries of difference.³⁰

Special thanks to Dr Luke Bretherton, Dr Don Horrocks and Dr Jonathan Chaplin for contributions and comments on earlier drafts.

³⁰ Sacks, Jonathan, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002) p83.

Values for Life: Tolerance

Since 9/11, talk of religious fundamentalism, the balance between rights and responsibilities and the role of faith in the public sphere means that tolerance has become central to the major public conversation. It has become a critical value in modern politics and in the citizenship discourse as it touches upon the associated themes of respect, diversity & equality and community cohesion. Together, these are the strands of active citizenship.

Tolerance is also central to how evangelical Christians understand and contribute to public policy and the wider 'politics' of equality. It is therefore essential for the Evangelical Alliance to play an active part in this discourse as we seek to present Christ credibly as good news in the public square. The 2007 Temple Address is our premier event to launch the debate and indicate ways in which the Alliance, in partnership with others, will inform and contribute to the conversation.

The Eighth Temple Address, in November 2008, will continue exploring Tolerance and associated themes.

The **Champions of Respect Awards** were established in 2005 to highlight young people who have positively impacted communities through actions demonstrating respect. The awards will be relaunched in Summer 2008.

Forum for Change facilitates Christian engagement in politics and civil society through mobilising Christians with critical experience in the main cultural drivers of today's society. The January 2008 conference will focus upon the role of the Church in the recovery of wellbeing, hope and happiness in society.

Our **2008 Summer Conference** will explore the theme *Tolerance: Public Policy and Cultural Diversity*. Please contact us if you would like to be involved.

Through 2008, the Alliance is commissioning research and will publish papers on tolerance and its associated themes of respect, equality & diversity and community cohesion.

The Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846 with the aim of bringing together Evangelicals to impact society. Throughout its history, a consistent thread has remained evident: the Alliance has always worked to unite evangelicals in order to bring about the spiritual and social transformation of society.

Today, the Alliance is one of the most influential Christian movements in the UK and is the largest body serving evangelical Christians. Its membership includes denominations, churches, organisations and individuals (there are around two million evangelical Christians in the UK).

The Alliance is committed to working across the UK, with devolved leadership and staff in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales who work out the Alliance's vision within their national context.

The Evangelical Alliance relies upon the generosity of its members and supporters in order to continue and develop its work. We would be delighted if you wished to consider contributing towards our work. Please contact us for more information about the Alliance and its work, or if you wish to be meet with us to discuss things further.

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"Tolerance is a key component of the current political and community discourse"

Joel Edwards

"Tolerance is good for all or it is good for none"

Edmund Burke, 1773

"Everyone in Britain has the right to religious freedom."

Life in the United Kingdom:
A Journey into Citizenship, Home Office: 2004

